

# Members' Newsletter



International  
Big History  
Association

Volume III Number 9  
October 2013

Cosmic Safari:  
From African  
History to Big  
History ..... 2

Call for Papers ..... 6

Big History:  
Between Nothing  
and Everything ..... 8



# Cosmic Safari (Part 1): From African History to Big History

by

**Christian Jennings**

*This two-part article explains how a historian of Africa gradually came to identify himself primarily as a proponent of Big History. In this newsletter, the first part narrates the story of how he came to realize that his research in African history pointed inevitably to the fundamental concerns of Big History. The second part for next month's newsletter will argue that African history is a natural ally of Big History.*

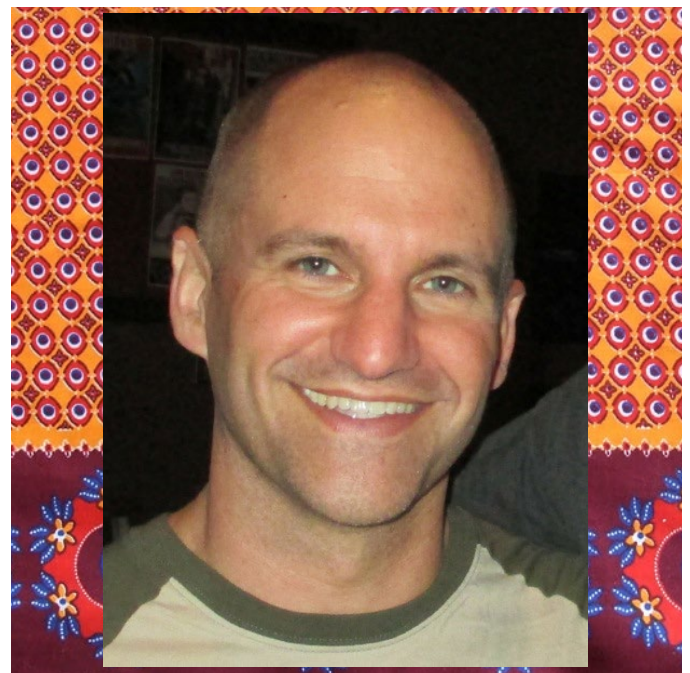
As a historian of East Africa, I've had the good fortune of pursuing two different but equally challenging research projects. The first, which formed the basis for my doctoral dissertation, examined the history of the Parakuyo, a cattle-keeping people who live in scattered settlements across Tanzania. The second, which has occupied my time for the past several years, is a history of the interactions between marine scientists and artisanal fishers on the coast of East Africa. While I consider both projects successful in their own ways, I think that each would have been strengthened considerably had I approached my research questions, right from the start, from a Big History perspective.

Let me try to explain. The first project sought to answer a deceptively simple question: who are the Parakuyo? A widespread notion held that they were cast-offs from the Maasai, the most prominent group of pastoralists in East Africa (and frequent postcard models). But there were some nagging problems with this interpretation, so I set out to dig a little deeper. My research took me to archives in Oxford and London, then to a longer residence in Tanzania, where I spent time both in the countryside, conducting interviews with Parakuyo elders, and in the National Archives in Dar es Salaam.

Eventually I arrived at a conclusion: the Parakuyo were not mere cast-offs, but were descended from an earlier pastoralist people that called themselves Loikop. Taking a somewhat controversial stance, I argued that the Maasai, too, had emerged from the Loikop, as recently as the early nineteenth century.

This would mean that the idea of "being Maasai," far from representing some primeval African identity, is instead more recent in origin than the idea of "being American." I wrote my dissertation, published its essential points in a journal article, then decided that what I had contributed to the historiography was really rather trivial.

Don't get the wrong idea. I care deeply about Parakuyo people and their history. I think their story matters, not only in the context of East Africa, but for the human story as a whole. But as I finished my doctoral work, I began to realize that I lacked the skills to explain precisely why I think their story matters on a larger scale. My focus on explaining the historical roots of ethnic concepts had merely scratched the surface of the question: who are the Parakuyo? It dawned on me that the Parakuyo way



*Christian Jennings*



of life is really a carefully calibrated ecological process that came into being long before there were people who called themselves Parakuyo, then evolved over several millennia, through mechanisms that only partly involved deliberate human effort.



*Parakuyo cattle in Tanzania; photograph by Christian Jennings*

Parakuyo pastoralism involves sophisticated transfers of energy between people, their cattle, the grasslands on which their cattle feed, the wells and rivers where they drink, the farming communities with which they trade, and the diseases with which they cope. On top of this are intricate links to the “outside” world which brought trading caravans from the coast, and more recently, cars, trucks, paved roads, bureaucrats, sunglasses, Coke, and mobile phones, all of which have altered and been absorbed into the Parakuyo ecological process in both obvious and subtle ways.

Parakuyo people, it should be noted, are well aware that their history is fundamentally ecological in nature. They and their ancestors have spent centuries learning how their landscape changes over time and how they might intervene for their own

benefit. This interaction between human knowledge and ecological processes is more than what we sometimes pigeonhole as environmental history. It is history. The problem for me, as a graduate student in history, was that I didn’t have a clue how to study or explain how human knowledge was intertwined with ecological processes, much less how to write about it in terms that would be familiar to other historians.

Today, almost ten years later, I would have an arsenal of concepts to deploy if I were to face the same problem, most important among them being the idea of collective learning. But David Christian’s *Maps of Time* had only recently been published; at the time, I didn’t even know of the existence of Big History. What I did have was a gut feeling that historians should become much more conversant with ideas from the natural sciences. I started to think seriously about how historians might combine African history with the history of science. Very little previous work had been done

along these lines. I decided to test the waters by researching and writing what I thought would be an “easy” article on marine science in East Africa.

I have long been fascinated by East Africa’s wondrous seascapes. A formative experience happened about twenty years ago, while I was an undergraduate student spending the summer in Kenya with an ecologist and his family. One week we drove down to a rural cabin on the coast to relax. I had been there briefly a few years before, as a high school student taking a break from a volunteer service project. That first time on the coast, I had seen only a tourist beach crowded with sunbathers and trinket-vendors. But now, walking along a nearly deserted shoreline, looking out at water painted in subtle dark blues, with the sun setting over the palm trees at my back, the intense

beauty of this place seemed revelatory.

I remember being enchanted by the fringing coral reef that extended at low tide from the beach almost to the horizon. As the sky darkened, I wandered carefully along the jagged rock, pausing here and there to look into the little pools of water with their stranded sea life: fish, starfish, crabs, and sea urchins, most of them vividly colored and patterned. Each low tide produces another cosmos of pools with different combinations of species.

This seemingly peaceful coastline, I intuited, must be in reality a dense tangle of ever-shifting physical patterns. I didn't think of it at the time, but the reef and the beach themselves are temporary features. In times past, changing sea levels have produced different coastlines, some farther inland, some farther out to sea. It will happen again in the future.

I have had the good fortune to return to the East African coast every few years since then. But I've learned that there are serious problems amidst the beauty. Coastal poverty severely inhibits the creative potential of East Africa and its residents.

For historical reasons, lack of access to education is acute, especially for girls and young women. The relentless expansion of human settlement has put intense pressure on the coast, resulting in overfishing, beach erosion, and pollution. Dar es Salaam, with its four million people, pours trash into the sea at an alarming rate. The Kenyan fishing town of Shimoni, which I was able to visit twice at an interval of nearly twenty years, has been overrun by tourism to such a degree that any dolphin

brave enough to come up for air is immediately surrounded by a flotilla of tourist boats.

These are the challenges facing the vibrant network of marine scientists that has emerged in the past few decades to become arguably the most organized and influential branch of science in the region. There are currently three active marine science organizations in East Africa: the Institute for Marine Sciences (IMS), based in Zanzibar, is a branch of the University of Dar es Salaam; the



*East African double-outrigger fishing canoe*

Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI), based in Mombasa, is a state-owned corporation; and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), is an independent non-profit organization that provides a regional forum for marine science.

IMS and KMFRI are direct descendants of the perennially troubled East African Marine Fisheries Research Organization (EAMFRO), established by



the British colonial governments after the Second World War. I had thought, somewhat naively in retrospect, that my article would simply trace the path that led from the colonial institution to its postcolonial successors. With a little detective work, however, I uncovered a trail of scientists going back to the 1860s, all of whom had conducted marine biological research in Zanzibar. A few had left batches of correspondence, diaries and field notebooks that were now available to researchers. I tracked down several of them in archives in England, Scotland, and the United States.

To my (again, somewhat naive) surprise, these primary sources strongly suggested that the knowledge produced by marine scientists relied in part on the knowledge produced by the fishing communities of the coast. These artisanal fishers use methods that have evolved over many centuries, during which African fishing practices have blended with influences from Arabia, India, and Indonesia. East African fishers primarily target the animal life of the coral reefs, mangroves, and estuaries along the coast, using small sailing vessels and canoes, with a complex array of hand nets, casting nets, seine nets, drag nets, gill nets, basket traps, and rows of stakes. And my sources were telling me that they had served as a source of knowledge for marine

scientists in East Africa since the nineteenth century.

I began to see that the knowledge of these fishers in turn was connected to long-term interactions between humans and their environment. On the East African coast, these interactions go back a long way indeed: more than a hundred thousand years, to the first foragers who explored the coastline. Humanity's first coastline. I now found the temporal scope of my "easy article" inexorably extending to include what some scholars like to call deep time. This is not an unusual phenomenon in historical research. People, events, and processes are naturally linked to each other in complicated webs across time and space, so in a sense, any historical study can quickly spin out of control.

But in seeking to understand the nature of interactions between marine scientists and artisanal fishers, my intuition was telling me to go ahead and let the story spin outwards. I'm sure this willingness



*Christian Jennings with Parakuyo pastoralists in Tanzania*

to embrace a larger framework had something to do with the fact that I had recently been reading the works of David Christian, Cynthia Brown, Fred Spier, and Eric Chaisson. As I've already suggested, Christian's concept of collective learning provided me with a crucial conceptual tool for thinking about human-environment interactions. In the same way that I gradually came to think of Parakuyo pastoralism as an ecological process strongly influenced by human collective learning, I also came to think of the knowledge produced by marine scientists and artisanal fishers as two distinct but mutually comprehensible varieties of collective learning within the same coastal environment. The conceptual framework I derived from Big History opened an entirely new horizon for me as a historian.

The most fascinating result of this new framework, to my mind, was that it allowed me to ask more interesting questions about my research subject.

The archival sources had insisted that my study of marine science in East Africa become a study of how scientists and artisans had learned about East African coastal environments and how they had interacted with each other over time. Big History provided a way to place that larger story in an even larger global context. Was the pattern of interactions between scientists and artisans on the modern East African coast unique? Subsequent research has shown it was not. Marine biologists, since the time of Aristotle, have absorbed, analyzed and adapted the collective learning of artisanal fishers from around the world. At this point, what had started as an African history project, with Big History influences, could perhaps be described more accurately as a Big History project with an African emphasis. In the second part of this essay, I will shift my perspective to show how historians of Africa, more than any other branch of our profession, should be natural allies for Big Historians.



*Fringing reef on the coast of Kenya*

**CALL FOR PAPERS**  
**INTERNATIONAL BIG HISTORY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE**  
**AUGUST 6 - 10, 2014**  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SAN RAFAEL (SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA), CALIFORNIA

***TEACHING AND RESEARCHING BIG HISTORY:  
BIG PICTURE, BIG QUESTIONS***

DEADLINE FOR [PAPER](#) / [PANEL](#) SUBMISSIONS IS FEBRUARY 10, 2014

The International Big History Association (IBHA) defines its purpose as “to promote, support and sponsor the diffusion and improvement of the academic and scholarly knowledge of the scientific field of endeavor commonly known as “Big History” by means of teaching and research and to engage in activities related thereto.”

*Article 2 of the IBHA Articles of Incorporation.*

The theme for the 2014 conference is “Teaching and Researching Big History: Big Picture, Big Questions.” The conference seeks to continue the dialog begun at the first IBHA conference in 2012. In addition IBHA seeks to create a forum for the articulation, discussion, and distillation of questions central to Big History. Among the topics that are to be addressed at the conference through a series of panels, roundtables, and discussions are:

- Big History and energy
- Big History in education
- Big History pedagogy
- Big History scholarship
- Big History research agenda
- Evolution of complexity
- Identification and analysis of thresholds
- Continuity and Contingency in our Universe
- Big History: interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or trans-disciplinary?
- Big History and the future
- Big History and meaning
- Big History outcomes and assessment
- Politics and Big History
- Little Big Histories



Along with regular panels and roundtables, presentations might consist of:

- Question and answer sessions – where Big Historians will be able to answer questions and discuss research questions that are worth pursuing
- Brainstorming sessions – with very short, provocative papers
- General discussion panels – where different points of view about Big History can be addressed in 5 minute increments, specifically addressing the different cultural perceptions of Big History
- Workshops – where participants will view short film fragments and other art forms chosen by Big Historians, and presentations on Big History from the artistic point of view from artists, musicians, and storytellers
- Conference roundup – with a keynote address that summarizes the most important things outcomes of the conference



We encourage proposals on any topic related to Big History. A select group of papers will be included in a compilation of Big History Research that will be published after the 2014 conference.

The time limit for presenting papers will be 20 minutes, and the deadline for submitting papers to the session moderator is three weeks in advance of the conference. Individual paper proposals must include a 250 word abstract with the title of the paper, name, institutional affiliation, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers, and brief curriculum vitae, all integrated into a single file, preferably in MS-Word. Proposals for complete sessions or panels must contain the same information for each participant, as well as contact information and a brief C.V. for the moderator if you suggest one. (The program committee can help find moderators, if necessary.) Please submit your [paper](#) or [panel](#) proposal by clicking on one of these links, which allow for submission information. The deadline for paper and panel submissions is February 10, 2014.

All presenters at the conference must be members of IBHA. Presenters may become members at [www.ibhanet.org](http://www.ibhanet.org) and will need to do so prior to registration for the conference.

The IBHA Conference will convene on the campus of Dominican University of California in San Rafael, which is located twelve miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Attendees will have the option of selecting from one of several hotels in San Rafael and the surrounding area or staying in on-campus accommodation. San Rafael is a wonderful destination in Marin County surround by woods and beaches. For all things San Rafael go to <http://www.sanrafael.com>. For a complete guide to San Francisco and its many attractions, visit <http://www.sanfrancisco.com/>. And if you have more time to explore the larger Bay Area, see <http://www.visitcalifornia.com/Explore/Bay-Area/>.

Please find more details on the conference at [www.ibhanet.org](http://www.ibhanet.org). We hope you can join us for this fantastic second IBHA conference!



*Edgehill Mansion, Dominican University of California*

*Program Committee: Mojgan Behmand, Cynthia Brown, Eric Chaisson,  
William Grassie, Lowell Gustafson, Fred Spier, and Joseph Voros*





## ***Big History: Between Nothing and Everything***

**by David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin**

1<sup>st</sup> edition | 9780-0733-856-17 | ©2014 | Now Available from McGraw-Hill Education!

*Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* surveys the past not just of humanity, or even of planet Earth, but of the entire universe. Written by the pioneers of the field, this text **presents a framework for learning about anything and everything, and encourages students to think critically** about our cumulative history, and the future of the world through a variety of lenses.



### **What Instructors are Saying about *Big History***

"I consider this text a masterpiece of research, scholarship, and exquisite writing." —Hope Benne, Salem State University

"The biggest strength of the text is its authors...They convey a strong sense of enthusiasm for their subject and of its inherent value. And they have built their analysis on a good grasp of current scholarship." —John Mears, Southern Methodist University

"This is going to be an excellent standard textbook of Big History." —Alexander Mirkovic, Arkansas Tech University

Visit [www.mhhe.com/wmg/mcgrawhill\\_bighistory](http://www.mhhe.com/wmg/mcgrawhill_bighistory) to hear lead author David Christian talk about the 1<sup>st</sup> edition!

**International Big History  
Association  
Brooks College of  
Interdisciplinary Studies  
Grand Valley State University  
1 Campus Drive  
Allendale MI 49401-9403**

**<http://ibhanet.org/>**



**International  
Big History  
Association**

The views and opinions expressed in the International Big History Association newsletter are not necessarily those of the IBHA Board. The IBHA newsletter reserves the right to accept, reject or edit any material submitted for publication.